

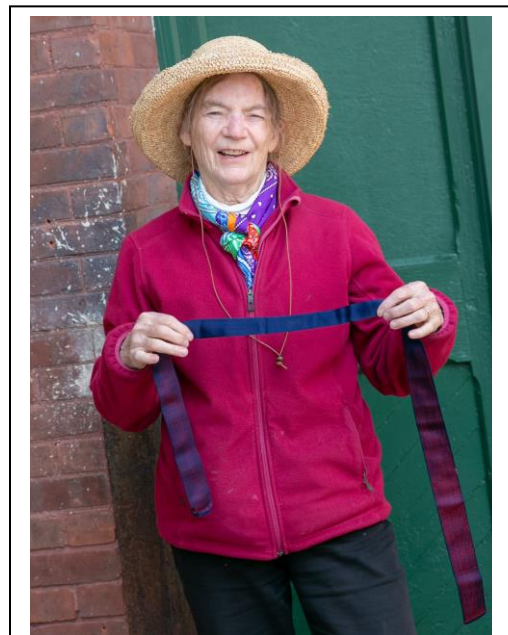
AN UPHEAVAL OF HISTORIC PROPORTIONS

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By Susan Barlow, Manchester Town Historian (and semi-retired person)

It was on March 15, 2020 that my over-packed schedule came to a sudden stop. For the first time in 20 years I was not leading nature hikes, history tours, tai chi practices, yoga classes. I stopped hosting holiday and church dinners and kaffee klatches at our house, and going to my paralegal job at a Manchester law office. My calendar was empty of outside events! At first it was a treat, like a mini-vacation, except for a giant cloud of anxiety hovering over all activities, and a barrage of unsettling news. And then I began to feel guilt – my students were missing out on the benefits of yoga, and our community couldn't get together for hiking meetups.

In March and April, the news media couldn't seem to describe exactly what was going on and what we needed to do – who should wear masks (at first, no one; then, everyone) or who was statistically most likely to get COVID-19 (at first, chronically ill old people; then, anyone, young or old). The news reported that grocery stores had no toilet paper, hand sanitizer, or cereal, but couldn't explain the extreme hoarding behavior of millions of Americans. On social media, if someone posted that a particular store had disinfectant wipes, then grateful viewers would rush out to buy some. "Entrepreneurs" or swindlers bought up protective equipment to resell at unconscionable profit; "just trying to make some money for my family," as one scoundrel said, "justifying" his behavior. Restaurant and retail workers lost their jobs, their livelihoods, and the wherewithal to pay their rent or mortgage. Small businesses closed. Deaths from the virus increased, reported in the media by region, town, age groups, old-soldiers' homes, convalescent facilities. Very disturbing and difficult times!



Town Historian Susan Barlow
with a Cheney silk cravat.

On the other hand, throughout these months, there have been many acts of kindness, generosity, personal sacrifice, and compassion. And blessed leisure time, even if not desired, to concentrate on our families, homes, projects, hobbies, and local exploration. It's wonderful to see thousands of people visiting Manchester parks and trails, enjoying nature at its rebirth in spring, with tiny trout lilies, violets, skunk cabbage, and bird-song. People are learning the names of plants and birds. They are greeting each other (from a safe distance) outdoors. Neighbors are talking to each other. Gardeners are offering to share plants.

In May, the medical news intensified, with anecdotal evidence that this virus is quirky, strange, and more dangerous than ever. It behaves differently from other scourges such as AIDS, Ebola, and polio. We are technologically gifted compared to our understanding of this virus. In May, Medicare sent out emails to warn members of COVID-19 scams – robocalls offering free respiratory masks (“give us your Medicare number”), phony test kits, and “immunity pills.” Yes, scammers take advantage of older people at every opportunity.

In May, Governor Lamont ordered Connecticut’s schools closed through June, but that no longer seems a disaster, as education continues online. We accept the cancelations – Manchester’s famous Memorial Day parade (few towns still host a parade), Fourth of July fireworks, summer camps, and August’s Cruisin’ on Main. We accept social distancing and learn new ways of coping, but it’s still strange and disorienting to give up our go-go-go routines and step back into our own homes, curtailing activities, letting someone else do our shopping.

I’d love to have a crystal ball to predict the future. Will we learn to be prepared for future health threats, and have personal protective equipment for all who need it? Will we recognize the effect of car and aircraft emissions on our atmosphere? We can certainly see the effects of the lack of emissions -- the sky is so very clear and blue – as it never has been in my lifetime, as I grew up before the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts of the 1970s. Despite the present health risks and tumbling economy, I am grateful for technology to communicate online, for my family helping with shopping and positive vibes, and for the medical personnel at the ready in case of becoming ill or getting injured. I’m grateful for Manchester’s open-space areas. I’m grateful for my particular economic situation – while losing my teaching income, I still have Social Security.

Without that crystal ball, I’ll just continue to hope that we will all get back to work or school, and move on to new routines that will benefit from what we’ve learned during the pandemic. May those lessons also benefit future generations – be better prepared with personal protective equipment (masks, shields), collect more data at the earliest illness, protect those elderly in convalescent facilities and old soldiers’ homes. This is an upheaval of historic proportions that future researchers, medical experts, and historians will study. May they see the good efforts made by brave families, volunteers, medical staff, and food suppliers. May they be patient with the deniers, non-mask wearers, and those con artists trying to make money on public fear. The pandemic shows us our best, our worst, our strength, our weakness. It also tests our patience, and we must do our best to stay hopeful as we cope and wait to see how this story gradually unfolds.